

## Chapter 3

# Successful self-management

*To conquer others is strong; to conquer oneself is mighty.*

Lao-Tzu

### Learning outcomes

This chapter offers opportunities to:

- identify tools and resources for successful self-management
- understand the importance of constructive attitudes to success in any field
- evaluate and develop your emotional intelligence
- identify factors that prevent you from achieving excellence.

### Introduction

Self-management encompasses a very broad range of skills, qualities, attitudes and experience. It can include some or all of the following:

- being able to analyse your situation, identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats;
- identifying resources and sources of support;
- managing your time;
- adopting attitudes that support your aims;
- taking a solution-focused approach to managing problems;
- managing your own emotions;
- coping when in distress;
- managing change, uncertainty and confusion.

These are usually demanded of students whilst at university or in their first jobs, and are addressed in this chapter. There are associated skills and strategies covered in other chapters. For example:

- being a self-starter (Chapter 4);
- being able to motivate yourself to finish what you start (Chapter 4);

- taking steps to improve your own performance (all chapters);
- being assertive (Chapter 5).

### *Intra-personal skills*

'Intra-personal' refers to your own inner world, in contrast to 'inter-personal', which refers to how you relate to other people. Intra-personal skills help us to manage our feelings, responses and actions, so that we are able to function at our best. Some branches of psychology have long recognised the importance of our emotional well-being to our capacity to perform well. You may have noticed this on occasions such as exams, if anxiety or personal matters prevented you from concentrating or remembering.

### *The world of emotions*

The 'intra-personal' world has the most profound effect upon our responses, our thinking, our behaviour, our views of ourselves, our feelings and our achievement. It touches upon what is closest to our hearts and being. It is, especially, the arena of the emotions. When we work with emotions, we can expect to feel emotional at

times. Most of us can find this quite challenging, and so there is a temptation to shy away from developing intra-personal skills. If we try to avoid any issue where emotions may be involved, it can mean we do not get to the heart of the issue, and so do not achieve all we could. On the other hand, when we understand more about ourselves, know our own triggers, and develop our emotional intelligence, we are more able to manage every situation we enter.

This chapter forms a brief introduction to a very wide-ranging subject. It does not go into detail about sensitive subjects. However, our life histories are very different and it is to be expected that some activities may raise a range of emotions for some people. If you feel you need to talk something through as a result of any activities, it is worth noting that student counselling services were set up to deal with all kinds of matters, small issues as well as major ones. You do not need to be in a crisis to see them. Services are confidential and they may also be able to find support for you away from the university if you prefer.

**Activity: Focus**

For this chapter, identify a personal goal or a situation that you wish to think about more deeply, in order to give focus to your responses.

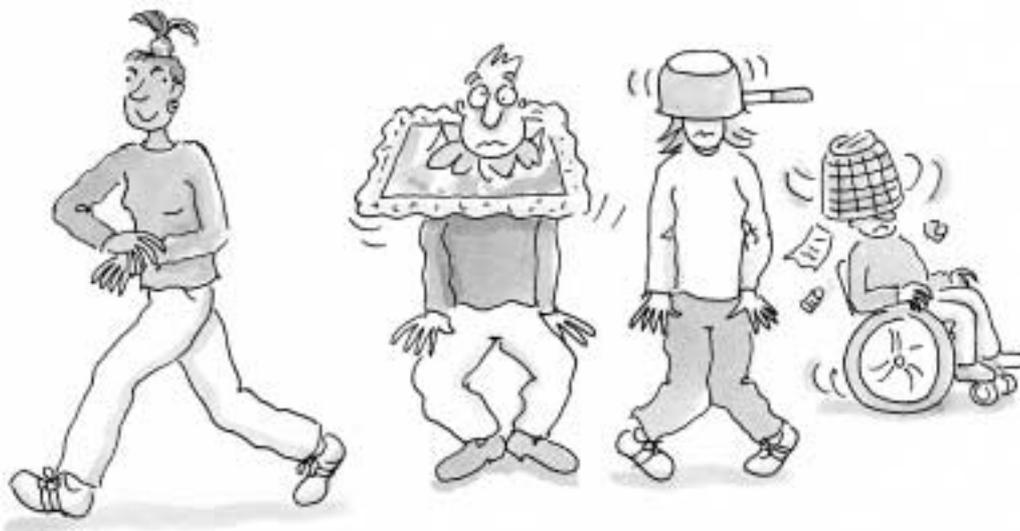
**SWOT analysis**

A SWOT analysis is a useful, quick tool for taking stock of your situation. It is a simple way of analysing your level of readiness for a new task. It can take you to the core of an issue very quickly. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.

**Activity: SWOT Analysis**

- For the focus you selected in the previous activity, use the resource sheet on p. 62 to jot down as many examples of strengths and weaknesses as you can under each heading. Include personal qualities, skills, experiences, knowledge, resources and support.
- Under 'Opportunities', jot down any opportunities that could arise from achieving this goal. Include short- and long-term benefits.
- Under 'Threats', jot down the things that seem threatening, worrying, very challenging, or which are causing you some anxiety.

The Activities in this book, and especially those in this chapter should help you to manage some of the 'threats'.



Emily prided herself on her emotional detachment.

# SWOT Analysis Resource Sheet

---

**Goal:**

**Strengths**

**Weaknesses**

**Opportunities**

**Threats**

## Personal resources

Very few of us have the ideal resources, but none of us is without any resources. This is especially true for students, as there is usually a wide range of services offered through the university and the local community. These sources of support are listed in various leaflets, books and directories.

### Activity: Finding information

- Brainstorm types of information available to you about sources of support. Who could tell you about other sources of information?
- Make a list of all the sources of support available through the Student Union and Student Services that are likely to be useful to you.

### Activity: Sources of support

In the boxes below, list the sources of support available to you for each item. Put a tick in the box by those that you need to pursue in the next few weeks.

Academic advice and guidance

Financial

Careers/finding a job

Meeting people

Finding somewhere to live

Emotional questions, needs and support

Health issues

Other resource needs:

### Follow this up

Make appointments to see the relevant people. Write these times in your diary. Before you attend appointments, ensure you have read any literature provided by these services, in case they need you to bring papers with you. Always bring your student card or student number.

### Time management

Your time is one of your most valuable resources. How well do you use your time at present? Which of the following characteristics are typical of you?

#### Activity: Evaluating time management

For each item, identify which one response is most true for you, indicating this with a tick (✓).

Characteristic	Yes, a lot	Yes, sometimes	No	I don't know
----------------	---------------	-------------------	----	-----------------

#### I recognise the following characteristics as true of me:

Being late	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not knowing where I am supposed to be	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Missing appointments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Rushing at the end of a task	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Missing deadlines	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Taking too long to complete a task	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Running out of time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not knowing how long it takes me to complete a task	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dashing around all day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Forgetting what I have to do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- If your response to all of the above was 'NO' you seem to have very good time management. Is it perfect, or are there areas where you could improve further?
- If your response to some items was: 'I don't know', then you would seem to lack awareness about your time management. Speak to people who know you well and find out what they think about your time management.
- If your response to any of the above was 'Yes', which of the following factors contribute to your time-management difficulties?

**Activity: Factors in time management**

For each item, identify which one response is most true for you, indicating this with a tick (✓).

Factor	Very true	Sometimes true	Never true
1. I use small pockets of time in the day to sort out minor tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I get down to work quickly; I am well motivated to start	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I have timed myself completing the different aspects of larger tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I know when I have done enough rather than aiming at perfection	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I say 'NO' when I lack time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I delegate work to others when I can	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I ask for help where possible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I have a go rather than worrying too much about getting things wrong	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I have strategies for starting a task rather than wondering where to begin	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I keep an effective diary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I look at my diary very often	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. I plan my activities in a logical order	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Activity: Identify solutions**

If you answered 'sometimes true' or 'never true' to any of the above time management factors, identify at least three you could improve.

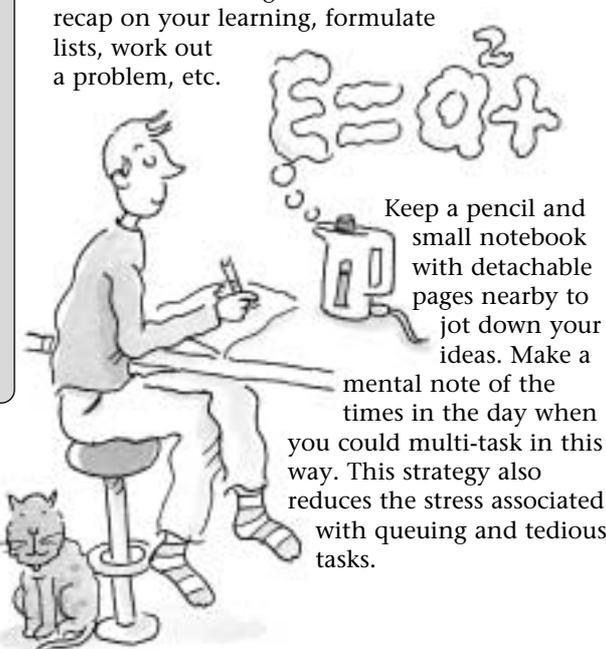
- Some strategies for managing these time factors are given below. Which could you use to improve your time management?
- In your reflective journal, re-write these as positive 'I will...' statements. For example, 'I will keep an effective diary'
- Add specific details that make it more likely you will take action. For example, 'I will buy a diary today at the Student Shop after my Design lecture. I will carry it in my blue bag. I will check it every evening after dinner so that I can plan ahead for the next day.'

**Managing time effectively**

For each of the time management statements in the activity 'Factors in time management' (above), there are suggestions below about how to address that aspect.

**1 Use small pockets of time in the day to sort out minor tasks**

This is a key strategy for effective time management. Use time waiting in queues, on a bus or even waiting for the kettle to boil to recap on your learning, formulate lists, work out a problem, etc.



## 2 Motivation to 'get going'

We saw in Chapter 1 how important motivation is to success. If you do not feel motivated, then be active in finding a source of motivation or inspiration. Focus on your long-term goals: check these are still important to you. Remind yourself of the benefits you expect. Write these where you can see them. Set short-term targets that you can manage, so that you get frequent tastes of success.

## 3 Time tasks

Time management requires you to know how long something takes. This is easier if you break a larger project down into smaller tasks. Often, one or two of these will take longer than you expect. It may be aspects of starting and finishing tasks that take longer than expected. Plan for all stages, and find out how much time you need to allocate for each stage.

## 4 Cost your time

Work out whether the amount of time you spend on each aspect of a task is 'cost-effective'. Usually the return (such as extra marks) decreases after a certain point. Academic work is hard to get perfect, as there isn't usually a single right answer. If you gain satisfaction from the additional study time, that is fine, as long as you have calculated what you are giving up in exchange.

## 5 Say 'no'

Identify what lies behind your difficulty in saying 'no'. It may be your beliefs, such as that 'a nice person' always helps out. If so, think what it means to be kind to yourself. Also, what



Of all the donkeys, Geoffrey found it the hardest to say 'No'.

are the negative consequences of always saying 'yes'? For example, does this give other people a chance to be kind or to take full responsibility? Alternatively, this might be a question of assertiveness or negotiation (see Chapter 5). There may be very long-standing or domestic issues which contribute to your difficulty in saying 'no'. If so, you should speak to a student counsellor.

## 6 Delegate to others

Identify what lies beneath a reluctance to delegate. For example, do you distrust others to do the job well? If so, what are the effects of this on your own time management, stress levels and personal efficiency? What would be the benefits to you and to others if you delegated more? How will others learn to do a job well if you do not delegate? Could you find a compromise where you share some tasks in the shorter term?

## 7 Ask for help

Recognise your own limits. Support services are set up because it is expected that people will need help. This is especially true for students. Asking friends and colleagues for help can contribute to their own personal development too. It can build their self-esteem and problem-solving skills. It gives them an opportunity to be helpful, which they may value.

## 8 and 9 Starting strategies

Use a basic starting strategy such as brainstorming or writing a list. Start with what you can do – and work from there. Often, a problem arises when we focus too much on what the end product should be rather than building from what we already know. Start small. Branch out. The ideas will come. If not, look for ideas in Chapters 4, 6 or 7.

## 10 and 11 Use a diary

A diary is an essential life tool. Some people prefer electronic organisers. Choose one that is light enough to carry around at all times. Check it at least three times a day. Develop the habit of writing everything in it to avoid double-booking. Enter all targets. Enter deadlines on the date of the deadline *and* the day you want to start work on that assignment.

# Student Day Planner

**Early morning (to do before I leave home)**

<i>Time</i>	<i>Task</i>	<i>Place/Room</i>	<i>With</i>	<i>Bring/Say/ Do</i>
<b>8:00–9:00</b>				
<b>9:00–10:00</b>				
<b>10:00–11:00</b>				
<b>11:00–12:00</b>				
<b>12:00–1:00</b>				
<b>1:00–2:00</b>				
<b>2:00–3:00</b>				
<b>3:00–4:00</b>				
<b>4:00–5:00</b>				
<b>5:00–6:00</b>				
<b>Early evening</b>				
<b>Night</b>				
<b>Preparation for tomorrow (must do)</b>				

## 12 Plan activities out in a logical order

Write a list of all the tasks you need to undertake during the day. Rewrite the list, grouping the activities by place. Allow sufficient time to move from one place to another. Write the locations in your diary.

### *Student Day Planner*

The Student Day Planner (shown on p. 67) divides time into sections most commonly used by students. Block in all your lectures, seminars, tutorials, workshops, lab-sessions, and assignment deadlines for each term or semester and then copy it. This saves writing it out several times. Indicate the room, the lecturer, and any materials you have to bring with you, so the information is easy to find.

### Things that get forgotten

- The time it takes to travel between appointments – mark that in.
- The time when work for a deadline should begin – rather than just the deadline itself.
- New locations. These may be hard to find. Plan to leave time for getting lost.
- Queuing time.
- Transport delays. These are not usually accepted as excuses unless they are very rare with unusual circumstances.
- Information technology going wrong; waiting to use a shared printer, etc.

Time management for academic work is covered in more detail in *The Study Skills Handbook* (Cottrell, 2003).

### Attitudes

*Up to a point, every man is what he thinks he is.*

F. H. Bradley

### What's in a thought?

No two people respond in the same way to the same event. One person may be angry and determined to take action if something goes wrong; a second may shrug and forget it; a third may feel it is 'yet another example of why there is no point trying'. Our thinking about an event

influences our response to it and the outcome. Our thoughts shape our experience, affecting what we feel physically and emotionally, how we interpret events, how we respond in a crisis and how we direct our lives.

### Taking responsibility

One of the first steps in managing a situation is taking responsibility for oneself as an active, thinking, creative agent within the process. It may well be the case that 'someone' should have acted better, or are even to blame for what happened. Taking responsibility does not mean excusing or taking the blame for somebody else's actions. It means moving beyond the 'blame' to find the most constructive outcome possible. The responsibility here is to yourself.

Often, the internal story that we create around events focuses on what went wrong and whose fault it was rather than on finding the best outcome. We run 'pre-recorded messages' about 'they' or 'it', such as:

#### The Big Bad 'they'

- they make me . . .
- they should take the first step . . .
- they shouldn't put me in this position . . .
- they shouldn't set these deadlines . . .
- they should help me more . . .
- they started it . . .
- they design these so badly . . .

#### The Big Bad 'it'

- it is too difficult . . .
- it is too soon . . .
- it is too complex . . .
- it overwhelms me . . .
- 'it's doing my head in' . . .
- it won't work . . .
- it's a waste of time . . .
- it keeps doing this wrong . . .



#### **Reflection** The pre-recorded message

- Which 'it' do you tend to blame (if any?)
- Which 'they' do you tend to blame (if any?)
- What other responses do you make when things go wrong that avoid taking personal responsibility for a constructive outcome?

### Constructive messages

We can create alternative messages that lead to more productive outcomes. For example:

- I can do this . . .
- It's OK. There is a way of dealing with this.
- We can find a solution.
- In the circumstances, the best step is . . .
- The first step is . . .
- I take responsibility for my part in this.
- I'll have a go.

If we repeat these often enough, these become new 'pre-recorded messages' that will kick in automatically.

#### Activity: Change the message

- Write down five constructive responses you could use when things go wrong.
- Check that these enable you to take responsibility for yourself.
- Choose the *one* you like the most and write it where you will see it this week. Try it out and record what happens

### Self-belief

Belief in oneself and one's own capabilities is essential. Low self-esteem creates stress, which makes the brain less efficient. It is also more likely to encourage a sense of defeat and a belief that there is 'no point'.

Self-confidence, a belief that one has the right to be and think and do what one wants, subject to reasonable limits and concern for others,

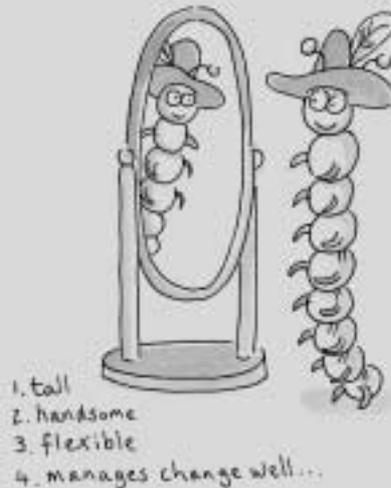
#### Reflection Self-belief critical incident

In your reflective journal, jot down a list of things you have done, no matter how small, that you are pleased about or proud of. Then, choose one to think about in more detail. Jot down:

- What happened? What did you do or say?
- What were the consequences? How did you or others benefit from this situation?
- What personal characteristics are demonstrated in this incident?
- What can you find in this incident that should make you feel good about yourself?

#### Activity: Self-descriptions

- Brainstorm a list of 30 things that you like about yourself.



- Go through your list, and underline all those that contain a positive description: 'I'm a reliable person', 'I am kind', 'I am helpful', etc.
- If there are less than 30 such positive phrases, add more to your list until there are 30. Don't underestimate yourself. If any phrases contain the words 'I try to...' or 'I am quite...', reword these so they are more definite and positive.

Which three descriptions of yourself do you like the best? What reasons have you for believing that these descriptions are accurate?

enhances performance. It motivates and drives you forward. It is also attractive to other people. This can bring more interest, resources and support, increasing the likelihood of success.

### Self-permission

Sometimes, we are unable to move forward because we refuse to give ourselves 'permission'. It is as if we hear a pre-recorded message saying:

- 'I'm not allowed';
- 'I'm not good enough';
- 'I'm not worthy of the risk';
- 'I'm not deserving of the consequences';
- 'I'm not made for this sort of thing';
- 'I'm not strong enough to cope with failure';
- 'It's not me'.

This can be true of anybody, but it is especially the case if there were strong messages at school or in the family that encouraged low expectations.



From this activity, you may recognise messages from a long time ago that are still echoing in the present. Many of the 'permissions' we refuse ourselves today began a long time ago. These do not have to remain as barriers to achievement. Take a look at your list and identify those on the 'I am not allowed list' that you could transfer to the 'I am allowed...' list. Write these down.

### Taking a solution-focused approach

*Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell 'em, Certainly I can! – and get busy and find out how to do it.*

Theodore Roosevelt

### Difficulty-focused thinking

Focusing on the difficulty usually produces negative responses: the problem can seem insoluble. It depletes your own and other people's emotional and physical energy, creating a sense of weariness, hopelessness or helplessness. The dominant message is that the problem is difficult, it will be hard work to find a solution, and solutions are unlikely. The difficulty-focused approach uses words and phrases such as:

- 'but . . .'
- 'I can't see how . . .'
- 'oh no!', 'not again!'
- 'it's hard to believe . . .'
- 'that won't work'
- 'I doubt it'.

At worst, difficulty-focused people tend to pick fault with every proposal, draw attention to flaws in the best possible solution, and discourage others from believing that there could be a sensible solution.

### A solution-focused approach

A solution-focused approach describes the situation, identifies the points of difficulty, and moves quickly to a search for the best possible resolution. It uses words and phrases such as:

- 'yes, and we could also. . .'
- 'what if we. . .?'
- 'are there other ways of looking at this?'

#### Activity: permission

Take three minutes each to complete the following two lists. Write quickly, without analysing your responses as you write.

##### List 1

**I am allowed to . . .** (write as many things as you can think of).

##### List 2

**I am not allowed to . . .** (write as many things as you can think of).

Check back over your two lists and see if you can spot any themes.

- What sorts of things are you 'allowed' to do?
- What sorts of things are you 'not allowed' to do?
- Which list is longer? What might be the reason for that?
- Who says 'you are not allowed to . . .'? Is it really true that you do not have permission to achieve in these areas?

- 'let's brainstorm ideas . . .'
- 'let's look again at our options . . .'
- 'let's see if we have missed any options. . .'
- 'let's check whether we can make this work . . .'
- 'what could we adapt?'
- 'who else would know about this . . .?'

The dominant message is that a solution of one kind or another will have to be found eventually, even if it is an interim one, so it is better to focus energies on finding the solution sooner rather than later. A solution-focused approach is often expected of those in managerial roles. As most graduates enter jobs with managerial responsibilities, it is worth developing this approach. If you have been surrounded by people who take a difficulty-focused approach, you might find this a useful challenge.



#### **Reflection** Solution-focus

- Do you tend to use the words and phrases associated with a 'difficulty-focused' approach or a 'solution-focused' approach?
- Which words and phrases are typical of you when faced with a complex situation?
- Do you tend to employ a solution-focused approach?
- What could you do to develop a more solution-focused attitude?

#### **Ways of addressing a new challenge**

Lazarus (1999) identifies two main strategies for approaching a difficulty: 'problem-focused coping' and 'emotion-focused' coping:

- problem-focused: looking outwards to the external, concrete problem and its circumstances;
- emotion-focused: looking inwards at personal attitudes and emotions that impact upon your individual reaction to the situation.

A solution-focused approach can use either approach, adopting a constructive and positive attitude for either. The solution-focused approach takes the position that there is a solution to every problem and that we have that solution within us. Sometimes, we arrive at the

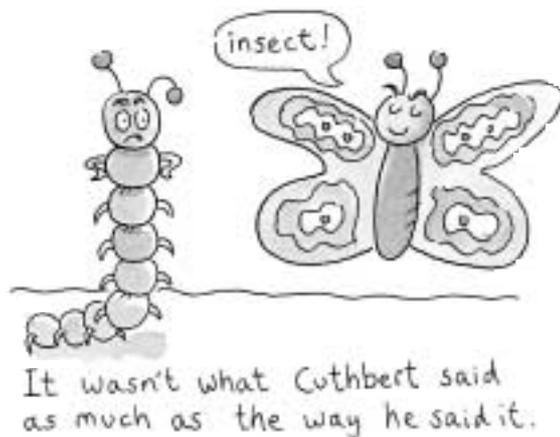
solution more easily if we talk to others or use a particular strategy. The 'solution' is the best constructive outcome that can be found for the situation in the circumstances. This may not be everything that we would like, but it directs energy in a positive way so that the best outcome possible is achieved.

A solution-focused approach requires very little, beyond an attitude of mind.

#### **Changing your environment**

A negative, blaming, 'can't be bothered' environment is not inspiring. A few people with such approaches can spread negativity very easily. They can even create a culture which is self-defeating. You can probably think of the people around you who create an aura of negativity. (Maybe you are that person?)

As adults, we can monitor the impact of our environment on our responses, taking note of what leaves us feeling encouraged and what does not. We can take action to create an environment around us that supports what we want to achieve.



#### **Identify positive inputs**

- Identify the people around you who leave you feeling positive about your goals, direction or programme of study.
- What is it about them that seems to increase positive responses?
- What other things in the environment support your goal? Competition and constructive criticism can be included as positive inputs.

Jot down these factors, starting with 'I . . .', and identifying how you could increase the positive aspects of your environment. For example:

I appreciate the way Busola makes a point of saying she enjoys good seminars. I could identify the things I find positive about each seminar.

I find it useful that the library is open until 8:00 p.m. I could use it more in the evening.

### Identify negative inputs

- Which people leave you feeling dejected, anxious, tired, despondent?
- What do you feel or do when you are in the presence of negative attitudes?

- What factors in your current environment could undermine or sabotage your goals?
- What can you do to reduce the impact of such factors upon you?

## Emotional intelligence

### Evaluating your emotional intelligence

The following activity enables you to evaluate your emotional intelligence. This is not a scientific test: emotions do not lend themselves easily to such testing. However, it gives you an opportunity to reflect upon your emotional life through a structured activity.

#### Activity: Evaluating your emotional intelligence

##### 1. Emotional management (self)

For each item, identify which one response is most true for you, indicating this with a tick. ✓

Item	Always true	Usually true	Occasionally true	Not true	Don't know
1. I know which emotions I am experiencing	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. I am aware of my emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. I allow myself to feel emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. I take notice of my emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. I can name the emotions I am feeling	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. I tell other people what I am feeling	<input type="checkbox"/>				
7. I take responsibility for my own feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8. I know what triggers different kinds of emotion in me	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9. I can respond without being overwhelmed by emotion	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10. I can express the right amount of feeling for the circumstances	<input type="checkbox"/>				
11. I can be assertive rather than aggressive or passive whilst feeling emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>				
12. I know when my feelings are not being expressed	<input type="checkbox"/>				
13. I make opportunities to express my feelings after an event, if needed	<input type="checkbox"/>				

**Activity: Evaluating your emotional intelligence** (continued)

Item	Always true	Usually true	Occasionally true	Not true	Don't know
14. I know the ways that my feelings affect my performance	<input type="checkbox"/>				
15. I regularly talk about my feelings to somebody I trust	<input type="checkbox"/>				
16. I reflect upon my feelings					
17. I allow myself to feel 'small' or vulnerable at times	<input type="checkbox"/>				
18. I cry if I need to					
19. I will allow myself to withdraw from a situation in order to experience my feelings, where feasible	<input type="checkbox"/>				
20. I am aware of how my feelings are affected by the people around me	<input type="checkbox"/>				

**2. Emotional management (others)**

For each item, identify which one response is most true for you, indicating this with a tick. ✓

Item	Always true	Usually true	Occasionally true	Not true	Don't know
1. I know which emotions other people are experiencing	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. I am aware of other people's feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. I allow other people to feel their emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. I take notice of other people's emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. I can name the emotions other people are feeling	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. I speak to other people about their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>				
7. I take responsibility for my own feelings when other people are feeling emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8. I know what triggers emotional responses in people I see regularly	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9. I am aware of my own responses to other people's emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10. I allow others to express what they feel is right for the circumstances	<input type="checkbox"/>				

**Activity: Evaluating your emotional intelligence** (continued)

Item	Always true	Usually true	Occasionally true	Not true	Don't know
11. I can be assertive when other people are being aggressive, passive or emotional	<input type="checkbox"/>				
12. I am aware when other people are not expressing their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>				
13. I make opportunities to enable other people to express their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>				
14. I am aware of how I let other people's feelings affect my performance	<input type="checkbox"/>				
15. I regularly listen to someone I know well talking about their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>				
16. I reflect upon the way feelings are experienced and expressed in groups	<input type="checkbox"/>				
17. I allow other people to feel 'small' or vulnerable	<input type="checkbox"/>				
18. I am comfortable when others cry if they need to	<input type="checkbox"/>				
19. I understand when other people withdraw from a situation in order to experience their feelings	<input type="checkbox"/>				
20. I am aware of how my feelings affect the people around me.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

**3. Emotions in action**

For each item, identify which one response is most true for you, indicating this with a tick.

Item	Always true	Usually true	Occasionally true	Not true	Don't know
1. I feel comfortable even when people disagree with me	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. I can allow other people their own opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. I can feel angry without taking it out on others	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. I can accept criticism without getting angry	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. I can voice my own opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. I am able to remain positive even when the situation looks gloomy	<input type="checkbox"/>				

**Activity: Evaluating your emotional intelligence** (continued)

Item	Always true	Usually true	Occasionally true	Not true	Don't know
7. I can allow myself to be sad – and to experience the sadness without pushing it away	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8. I can make decisions and act upon them	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9. I can stop and assess a situation before I act or speak	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10. I feel comfortable working with people from very different backgrounds to mine	<input type="checkbox"/>				
11. I can enjoy diversity in the people around me	<input type="checkbox"/>				
12. I will speak out for what I believe is right	<input type="checkbox"/>				
13. I ask for help when I need it	<input type="checkbox"/>				
14. I can let myself feel emotions without taking a drink, cigarette, drug or comfort eating	<input type="checkbox"/>				
15. I am calm in a crisis	<input type="checkbox"/>				
16. I can identify when my behaviour is unreasonable – and stop it	<input type="checkbox"/>				
17. I can manage uncertainty without having to have an answer straight away	<input type="checkbox"/>				
18. I can manage my emotions under pressure	<input type="checkbox"/>				
19. I take responsibility for my own part in events	<input type="checkbox"/>				
20. I can admit a mistake and apologise.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

**Scoring your responses**

For each item on the above sets of questions, allocate to yourself the following scores: Always true (4); Usually true (3); Occasionally true (2); Not true (1); Don't know (0).

1. Emotional management (self): Score \_\_\_\_\_
2. Emotional management (others): Score \_\_\_\_\_
3. Emotions in action: Score \_\_\_\_\_

**Total score:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Activity: Evaluating your emotional intelligence** (continued)

**Interpreting your scores**

- 150–200** If your answers are accurate, this suggests that you have a sophisticated approach to emotional life. You seem capable of managing your own emotions as well as coping with the emotions of other people. You seem able to make the kinds of responses that accompany emotional intelligence. Your emotional intelligence should provide you with an asset in almost any situation.
- 100–149** This is a good score. If your evaluations are accurate, you have a very good foundation for developing your emotional intelligence further. Emotional intelligence is an asset in most situations so this is very much worth doing. Look at the responses which have high scores: what do these tell you about your strengths? Are there any themes evident in the questions that received lower scores? It is worth noting whether one of the three sections had a lower score than the others. Identify which of these is your priority for further self-development.
- 50–99** This is a reasonable score, especially if you entered university from school. However, it suggests that you have lots of room to develop your emotional management skills. If your evaluation is accurate, you would benefit from making emotional self-management a priority area. Identify which areas are your strengths. These are the assets you take into most situations. Look for themes in the lower scores. Which types of issues are most relevant to the achievement of your goals? Identify which of these is your priority for further self-development.
- 0–49** If your evaluation is accurate, you may have a real challenge on your hands. Remember that this is not a scientific test. There may be many areas of emotional intelligence in which you excel that are not covered by this activity. For example, some people are exceptional in crises – but there is only one question related to managing a crisis above. Other people are emotionally sophisticated with particular types of people, such as children, the elderly, sick people, etc. In addition, your evaluation may have been harsh. On the other hand, you may really feel that the emotional world is rather a tricky one. You may feel that people misunderstand you or your motives much of the time. You are not alone if you feel that. However, it is not necessarily a very comfortable position to be in. The good news is that emotional intelligence is an asset that can be developed. The student counselling service at the university will probably be able to give you confidential advice if you are at all concerned.

**What is emotional intelligence?**

‘Emotional intelligence’ is a term made current by Goleman (1995). It is slowly becoming recognised that it isn’t simply what we do and what we think that affects our ability to cope, manage and succeed, but also how we manage our feelings.

Emotional intelligence involves:

- knowing the appropriate feelings for the circumstances;
- experiencing the appropriate feelings for the circumstances;
- expressing feelings appropriate to the circumstances;
- making opportunities to express feelings that cannot be expressed fully in the original circumstances.

This may sound easy. However, your reflections above may have indicated to you that emotions often get in the way of a rational interpretation of a situation. They tend to prevent us from working towards the best or most constructive solution to the issues. In general, people tend to over-express their feelings (excessive anger, passivity, distress and so forth) or to bottle up their feelings in order to cope. Different circumstances permit a different level of expression. We need to consider such matters as:

- What response will lead to the most constructive outcome?
- How will other people respond?
- What are other people’s needs?



### Reflection Examples of emotional responses

Think of three situations where you had a strong emotional response. Choose three different types of communication (in a group, individually, face to face, telephone, email) or three types of situation (work, study, with friends, with strangers). For each situation, jot down thoughts in your reflective journal in response to the following questions.

- What happened?
- What did you feel?
- Which feelings did you express?
- What did you do at the time?
- What were the consequences?
- What did you do or feel within the next 48 hours?
- Did your responses enable you to gain the most constructive outcome possible from the situations?

Consider whether your responses seem to be different depending on the circumstances or people involved.

### Where do the unexpressed feelings go?

Whilst it is important to know what we feel and to acknowledge our feelings, there are times when it is not appropriate to express all of what we feel. In the activity above, you will probably have identified some feelings you did not express at the time. Often, such feelings go unexpressed for a long time. Unfortunately, they do not usually just disappear. Where do they go?

There are numerous ways that unexpressed emotions make themselves felt. A few of these are given here. As you read through them, identify which responses seem to be most typical of your own. You would be a very remarkable person if you made none of the following responses.

#### Displacement

The emotion is ignored and sneaks out when not expected, usually when you experience a similar emotion later. For example, you say nothing when you are irritated several times

during a morning, and then snap or shout at somebody for something very minor later on in the day. Many people are not aware of what they are feeling yet their feelings may be all too evident to the people around them.



Ida knew for certain she had her anger under control.

#### Disproportion

This often goes hand in hand with displacement. When you express an emotion it should be proportionate to the situation. Disproportionate responses are noticeable when quite small things that do not seem to affect other people provoke a strong reaction in others. A small event may lead to tears, shouting, anger, violence, insults, or extreme distress.

If something has been building, unexpressed for a long time, it is usually advisable to speak to a counsellor. They can help you release the emotion in a manageable way.



### Reflection Displacing emotions

Think of a situation when your emotional reaction was very strong for the situation.

- What happened? What did you do or say?
- Which emotion was being displaced?
- What had originally provoked the emotion – was it something recent? Was it the result of a long-build up of emotion?
- What could you have done to prevent displacing the emotion onto the later situation?

### **Distorted thinking**

Unexpressed emotions can eat away at people, leading to distorted thinking such as:

- Believing there is no solution or way out of a problem;
- Exaggerating how bad things are;
- Over-generalising: judging everything from one or few examples. For example: 'my first essay was bad so I know I shouldn't be at university';
- Exaggerating one's own role in events, so as to see oneself as very incompetent, bad, unkind or completely to blame for everything that went wrong. This is often a way of refusing to admit one's actual role (as it invites people to reassure you that you are not wholly to blame);
- 'All or nothing' thinking: 'If I can't have this then I don't want anything';
- 'Magical thinking': believing that one is jinxed, doomed, specially chosen, fated;
- Mistaking feelings for facts: 'I feel it is all terrible, so it must be';
- Focusing on the negatives: seeing only what went wrong, and judging a situation only by what was not perfect;
- Rationalising: finding a reason for doing what you want to do or for not doing what needs to be done.



#### **Reflection** Distorted thinking

We are all capable of distorted thinking from time to time.

- Which of the above methods do you use when you are not feeling good about yourself or your work?
- What kinds of situations prompt you to distorted thinking?
- What benefit does the distorted thinking give you in the short term? Bear in mind that if you didn't feel it was giving you something, you wouldn't do it.
- How does the distorted thinking stand in the way of achieving your goals? (It does!)

### **Managing personal distress**

#### **The ABC model for dealing with distress**

Ellis (1994) and Dryden and Gordon (1993) outline the 'ABC model' for managing situations that cause distress. The ABC model helps to analyse the source of the distress. It separates the core of the issue from the beliefs and attitudes that then amplify the problem. This makes it easier to find a solution or way of coping, keeping the core issues in perspective. ABC stands for:

**A = Activating event:** What happened that led to the emotional distress?

**B = Beliefs:** What beliefs contribute to the emotional distress?

**C = Consequences:** e.g. anger, illness, inability to work, difficulty getting down to work or concentrating

The example below (p. 79) also adds a 'D':

**D = Dealing with it:** what action will you take to manage the situation?

## **Example** ABC model for dealing with distress

---

- A** *Activating event* The 'activating event' might be that a student, Gareth, has not read the course handbook. As a result, he did not realise that two essay deadlines fell on the same day. He asked for an extension, but was refused as it was not possible in the circumstances. Gareth must complete both essays in five days. If not, he will need to retake a module. The situation is not easy.
- B** *Beliefs* Gareth can make a decision to work flat out to produce two essays, possibly accepting lower marks, or he can defer one of the modules and increase the possibility of higher marks for both in the long term. This would take a few months longer, but is feasible. However, Gareth argues that he is 'totally stupid' to have got into this situation and that this is typical of the mess he makes of his 'whole life'. He links the current problem with difficulties he experiences elsewhere so that the issue is no longer a missed deadline (which can be managed) but everything about his life. He does not believe he can write the essays as he has convinced himself that nothing he does will work.
- C** *Consequences* The consequences are that Gareth's beliefs lock him into inaction. All of his energies are diverted into self-blame and hopelessness. He feels very small and is too embarrassed to talk to his friends. Instead of using his time to write the essays, he wastes time worrying or drinking, trying to push the problem away. Because he is stressed, he finds it difficult to concentrate. He can't study or make sense of what he reads. He misses his shift for his part time job, making his overall situation even worse – convincing him further that his 'life' is a problem.
- D** *Dealing with it* What could you do if you found yourself in a similar situation? In this case, it is beliefs that are fuelling the distress and leading to unhelpful consequences. You could either focus on the problem so as to divert yourself from the beliefs, or change the beliefs.

If you focus on the problem, you can:

- Describe the activating event, reducing it to the basics. Acknowledge what went wrong and what has been learnt. Yes, Gareth should have read the handbook. However, he is unlikely to make this mistake again, and this could be a critical lesson from which he learns and gains in the longer term. He is far from being the only student to get into such a position.
- Consider what has to be done. List all your options. Find out what these are and write them down. Write the advantages of each option. Then consider the feasibility and consequences of each.
- Move as quickly as possible into 'problem-solving mode', using a problem-solving strategy (see Chapter 4). Brainstorm options for solving the core problem. Evaluate these and choose one.
- Make a decision - and then stick to it and accept the consequences. The consequences might not be ideal, but they can be the 'best possible' for the situation. They are not life-threatening or catastrophic in the larger picture.
- Develop an action plan and follow it.

To challenge unhelpful beliefs:

- Write down words that motivate you, such as: 'there is a solution' or 'I can do this'.
  - List your negative thoughts (beliefs). Go through the list, undertaking a 'reality check'. Ask 'Is this belief going to help me find a solution?'
  - Challenge all beliefs that start with 'I should have . . .' or 'I always . . .'.
  - Challenge all beliefs that refer to any other situation except the current problem.
  - Cross out, with a thick line, all beliefs that do not help achieve a solution to the current situation.
  - Brainstorm constructive phrases or messages until you find at least one that seems both helpful and true to you. Underline that belief or idea three times. Put a line through all the others.
  - Speak to a friend or counsellor to put the situation into perspective.
-

## Managing change, confusion and uncertainty

### Activity: Approaches to change

For each item, identify which one response is most true for you, indicating this with a tick.

Characteristic	Always true	Usually true	Occasionally true	Not true
1. I enjoy change	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I look for the opportunities in new situations and circumstances	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I feel comfortable meeting new people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I am confident about coping in new surroundings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I welcome new perspectives on an issue or problem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I ask people for feedback	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I can change my plans at the last minute without feeling stressed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I can study reasonably well in a wide range of circumstances	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I enjoy starting new subjects or projects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I will work early or late at short notice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Scoring your responses

For each item, allocate to yourself the following scores: Always true (3); Usually true (2); Occasionally true (1); Not true (0)

Score \_\_\_\_\_

### Reflecting on your score

**24–30** This suggests you have a very strong and positive approach to change. What beneficial characteristics does this enable you to bring to study? How would this be of benefit in a work context? Do you look for change at the expense of continuity?

**16–23** This suggests you have a positive approach to change. What beneficial characteristics does this enable you to bring to study? How would this be of benefit in a work context?

**8–15** This suggests that you have an ambivalent approach to change. You can be positive about change. What benefits could you gain from developing a more positive approach?

**0–7** Your score suggests a strong preference for continuity. You may need to be creative to find work and circumstances that enable you to maintain this level of continuity. It may be helpful to talk through your resistance to change with a counsellor. What disadvantages does your resistance to change bring you? Is there one area where you could develop greater flexibility?

### The changing context

Technology and changes in the way that work is organised have revolutionised the way we work and study. For most of history, people knew from childhood what work they would do, their station in life, their relative income, the tools they would be using. Lives were mapped out often before a person was born, depending on their family circumstances. Even when education changed the level and range of opportunity, most people studied for a degree between the ages of 18 and 22, then entered the profession that they would stay with for the rest of their lives.

The dominant pattern for people in many countries now is that they can study towards almost any profession they choose. In Britain, you can return to any level of education at any age. Many people return to take a second or a higher degree. It is expected that a person will continue training in new skills throughout their lives. It is likely that you will have several or many jobs, probably in many different locations. The technical skills you learn today will be out of date very quickly. Factual information you acquire may also have a short shelf life. However, some skills you acquire now are likely to be of value throughout your life. These include:

- intra-personal skills and qualities (how you manage yourself and your attitudes)

- problem-solving skills (approaches to tasks)
- and inter-personal skills (how you relate to other people).



### Reflection Coping with change

- What kinds of change do you find easiest to accept and to cope with?
- What sorts of things do you prefer to stay constant or the 'same'?
- What kinds of change do you find difficult to cope with?

### Dealing with uncertainty

#### The 'right answer'

University life and study can be very challenging to our way of seeing the world. Many would argue that it should be and that a university education should stretch students and make them re-evaluate their core beliefs and ways of thinking. The challenge can be difficult to manage at first. In the 1970s, Perry undertook research with students at Harvard and Radcliffe colleges in the USA. He found that even outstanding students often expected to be given or led towards the 'right answers' by their tutors. How far is this true of you? Check your own responses using the following activity.

#### Activity: Is there a right answer?

This activity is likely to take at least half an hour and maybe much longer. There are three parts.

##### Part 1 Issues

On a piece of paper, jot down quickly your ideas about *three* of the following issues:

- It is ethical to clone human life.
- Students should be trained to develop their thinking skills as part of every programme.
- All adults should be required to contribute 50 hours a year to community or environmental work.
- To protect the environment, each person should have a restricted number of travel miles for holidays over their lifetime.
- Emotional intelligence should be part of the school curriculum.
- There should be a curfew on all people with a criminal record.
- Science requires creative thinking rather than logic.

(continued)

**Activity: Is there a right answer?** (continued)

**Part 2 Approaches**

Below is a list of approaches that students take when considering new problems or challenging issues (adapted from Perry, 1970.) For each of the issues you were asked to consider, decide which of the following positions best describes where you stand on the issue.

**1. Absolute answer**

I think this is a question of right and wrong or that the right answer to this issue is obvious. I know where I stand, I know my own opinion, and I don't think an alternative answer is acceptable. Recognised authorities such as my tutor, a book, the law or a professional body will be able to tell me what the right answer is on this.

**2. Temporary unacceptable uncertainty**

The right answer hasn't been found yet but needs to be. Professionals, academics or other authorities need to clarify what the right answer is in order to avoid confusion.

**3. Acceptable uncertainty**

Everyone has a right to his or her own opinion. All answers are equally acceptable. My answer is as good as anyone else's. Lecturers and experts do not have the answers.

**4. Relativism**

It's all relative. The 'right answer' would depend upon the circumstances. Another person may think differently from me and still be right, if their situation and experience is different. There are no right answers. There is no real way of deciding what is right for all situations.

**5. Commitment to a considered viewpoint, taking responsibility for the decision**

I understand and can appreciate other viewpoints on this issue, but I believe some answers or perspectives are better than others and that I need to make a personal decision on where I stand amongst conflicting opinions. I realise that making this choice of an answer may carry responsibilities and have implications for how I think, speak, and the choices I make.

**6. On-going development**

I am committed to this viewpoint, appreciate other viewpoints and realise that my decision carries personal responsibility. However, I also feel that this is something that I need to keep returning to, even if it means some uncertainty. The answer I have committed to is of great importance to who I am, to my values, and the kind of person I want to be.

**Part 3: Interpreting your position**

Perry explained the thinking that underlies each position. He ordered them into a hierarchy of responses (given below).

- Which position on his hierarchy is occupied by your answers? Are your answers generally in position 1, 2 or 3?
- In general, which of the nine stages described below do you think is most true of you?

*Position 1: 'Right-answer positions' (Approaches 1 and 2 on the above activity)*

1. Absolutist stage: there are right answers available. Things are either right or wrong. It is the teacher's job to provide the right answers.
2. Bad authority versus good authority: there are right answers but uncertainty is created unnecessarily by poor teachers or leaders. It is acceptable for right answers to be withheld when teachers want students to find the 'right' answer themselves.
3. Temporary uncertainty: there are right answers but it isn't clear what these are yet.

(continued)

**Activity: Is there a right answer?** (continued)

*Position 2: Relativism stages* (Approaches 3 and 4 on the activity above)

4. Acceptable uncertainty: 'Everyone has a right to their own opinion', despite what teachers or leaders might think. For assignments, it is important to find out the lecturers' opinions.
5. 'All knowledge and value are contextual and relative.' For assignments, students should enquire: 'What is required of me in this context?'

*Position 3: Commitment stages* (Approaches 5 and 6 on the activity above)

6. Personal orientation: you feel it is necessary to make a commitment to certain viewpoints (out of a range of possibilities) with an understanding of, and tolerance for, other viewpoints.
7. You have made a commitment to certain viewpoints.
8. The implications of your commitment have been experienced and you realise the responsibilities this brings.
9. You regard your commitment to your views as 'an ongoing, unfolding activity' through which your lifestyle and identity are expressed.



**Reflections** Uncertainty

- What are your expectations of your lecturers? Do you expect them to provide, or lead you towards, a 'right answer'?
- How comfortable do you feel with the idea that there may not be 'right answers' to questions that are important to you?
- How open you are to hearing opinions that contradict your own?

If this subject interests you, ask your tutors for literature that discusses the nature of 'truth' or 'fact' or 'right answers' in your subject area.

### Changing position

Perry found that it can take years for students to feel comfortable at stages 7–9 of this hierarchy. You may find you are in very different positions on the hierarchy depending on the issue.

You do not have to agree that Perry's hierarchy applies to every question. However, the hierarchy can be a useful tool for evaluating the nature of your own responses to issues, and your readiness to accept uncertainty on that issue. You will know how comfortable or uncomfortable you feel about applying any particular stage to your own ideas. You may need a greater knowledge of all the issues and the consequences of taking a particular position in a wide range of circumstances in order to change position on the hierarchy.

It can be hard to feel comfortable at levels 4–9 on some issues unless your sense of self, your

beliefs or your values also change. There isn't a 'quick fix' to changing the way we think. However, being aware of how we are thinking and responding can help the process of development.

You can also use Perry's hierarchy to help you understand where other people are in their thinking. It is important to be sensitive to where people are situated: you cannot force people into a different set of beliefs.

### Transitional learning and 'disequilibrium'

Issues discussed in higher education may not have 'right' answers. There may be several answers or it may depend on how particular evidence is assessed or there may be insufficient evidence to come to a firm conclusion. Some issues discussed at this level will directly challenge what you have learnt before, or seem to contradict views that you or people close to you hold as valuable. This can be unsettling or confusing.



**Reflection** Confusion

- Do you feel that you are finding it harder to learn since entering university?
- Do you ever feel that you are more confused about what an issue involves when you find out more about it?
- Do you feel you are going backwards the more you learn?
- How does this make you feel? Do you think you are really 'going backwards'?

## 'Equilibration'

Saven-Baden (2000) uses the term 'transitional learning' to refer to 'shifts' that occur when students' frames of references, or 'life world' are challenged by their learning, especially as the result of critical reflection. You may feel this at certain times when you move onto a higher level of learning. Saven-Baden describes this state as: 'characterised by frustration and confusion, and a loss of sense of self'.

This suggests that we can interpret some confusion as a healthy sign. It indicates that we are pushing ourselves, our learning, our knowledge, our skills beyond their former level. In other words, we are not stagnating. Piaget (1975) regarded this process of 'equilibration' as essential to our development. Equilibration occurs in three stages:



1. Equilibrium: first there is a state of satisfaction with our current ways of thinking and doing.



2. Disequilibrium: then we gain a sense of growing dissatisfaction and an awareness of the limitations of our existing ways of thinking and doing. This is the stage where confusion and worry can set in.



3. A more stable equilibrium: finally, if we persist in our enquiries, we can move to a more sophisticated way of thinking that overcomes the limitations of our previous thinking and performance.

Siegler (1991) cites the example of a child who thinks that only animals are living things. When she hears plants referred to as being 'alive', she becomes uncertain of what 'alive' means. This uncertainty, although temporarily uncomfortable, is a necessary stage in opening up to a new understanding of the world. Dissatisfaction begins an internal questioning which then opens us up to exploring new options.

For students to progress to more sophisticated ways of thinking, they need to be receptive to disequilibrium and to be able to manage or 'contain' short-term confusion. Otherwise, they may cling to the 'security' of their former equilibrium.

### Reflection Coping with disequilibrium

- Think back to a time when you felt you would never learn something – but did. What was it that was difficult to learn?
- How did you manage to work through the 'confusion' or disheartened stage to the stage where you had achieved your goal?
- What was it like to be successful in the end?
- How well do you feel you can manage the 'disequilibrium stage' as a student? What kind of support would help?

### *Holding the uncertainty*

When we feel uncertain or confused, we lose our sense of equilibrium. Naturally, this makes us want to find our 'balance' again. The temptation is to act too quickly, rushing in to find a solution so that we feel better. Often, this leads to hasty action which limits our possibilities.

Although it may feel uncomfortable, it is important to learn to experience the feelings of discomfort and to 'sit with them' for a while, whilst we find out more about the situation. We need to:

- acknowledge the feeling of discomfort or anxiety;
- allow ourselves to wait before rushing into action;

- find help and support if we need it. Talking to somebody can help;
- find out more about the idea or situation that challenges us;
- aim to understand what it is that we find so challenging – and look for potential opportunities;
- consider our options, preferably within a problem-solving strategy;
- act when we have weighed up the options.



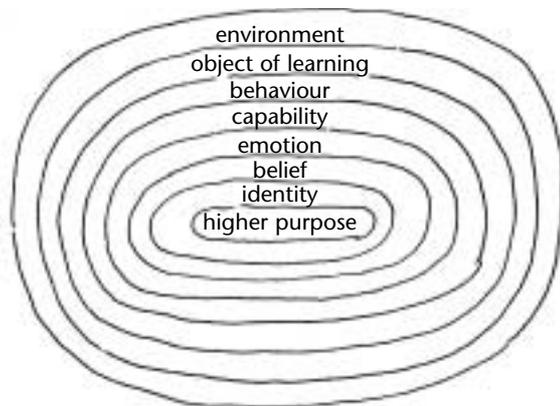
### **Reflection** Managing uncertainty

In your reflective journal, jot down your responses to the following questions.

- What kinds of uncertainty have you been faced with recently?
- What was your response?
- In retrospect, do you think you could have managed this uncertainty differently or more constructively?
- Did you look for any support in managing this uncertainty? If not, what stopped you?
- What could you do to improve the way you manage uncertainty?

## Motivators and inhibitors to excellence

For both study and work, we are subject to influences that either enhance performance, or else inhibit our progress. Dilts et al. (1990) offer a useful framework for exploring factors that can inhibit or promote learning. This section adapts Dilts's model, using eight levels to analyse performance. We are usually affected at one or more of these levels, which prevent us from achieving excellence.



Levels of inhibition and motivation (adapted from Dilts et al., 1990).

## Improving performance

### 1. Environmental (where? when? with whom?)

The over-arching context in which learning takes place has a profound effect upon learning. This could be the wider social, cultural or ideological context or the immediate physical environment such as the lighting or background distractions. If your primary difficulty in improving performance is primarily environmental, this may be evident in the way you speak:

*'I can't learn here, now, with them, on this course, at this university, with that lecturer, from this book . . .'*

If this sounds like you, what can you do to change the environment to suit your needs?

## 2. The object of learning: content (what?)

If you find something difficult, it can help to change way the task is worded:

- rephrase instructions;
- put things into your own words;
- imagine you are explaining the issue to someone much younger;
- look for real-life examples that are similar;
- draw the problem out as a chart, diagram or picture.

If your primary difficulty lies in the subject matter, this may be evident in comments such as:

- 'I can't learn *that*';
- '*it* doesn't make sense';
- '*what's it* supposed to be about?';
- '*it's* nonsense to me.'
- '*it's* boring.' '*It's* irrelevant.'

## 3. Behaviours (what do we do?)

You may feel you want one thing, but behave as if you wanted something else. For example, students usually want to get a good grade for their work. However, they may not read or think or talk enough around the subject to develop deep understanding and expertise. This may be a question of priorities (too many conflicting demands on their time) or poor induction into the culture of higher education (not realising that this is what students are expected to do.) Inhibition at this level is expressed in speech that emphasises 'doing words':

- 'I can't *learn* or *do* that';
- '*writing* essays is too difficult';
- 'It takes me too long to *do* that'.

## 4. Capability (how?)

If your prime difficulty is at the capability level, you are likely to put the emphasis on words and phrases expressing ability:

- 'I'm *not able* to learn that'.
- 'I *don't know how* to learn that'.

If this sounds like you, then consider why you are not able to do what you wish:

- it could be lack of practice;
- it could be because you have not spent long enough building up a good foundation

knowledge and appropriate thinking skills: see Chapter 6 on the way the brain develops to support new learning;

- you may need to improve study skills;
- you may be in the 'transitional stage' referred to above (p. 84);
- you may work better at a different pace: many people find university programmes are very rushed;
- you may benefit from additional support and guidance.

Give yourself time to approach each task. Break bigger tasks into smaller, manageable targets. Find or set up a support group or action set (see Chapter 5).

## 5. Emotional (affect)

If the primary difficulty lies at an emotional level, you may emphasise words that refer to emotions: 'I *feel* I'll never learn this.' 'This *irritates, annoys, angers, upsets* me.' Alternatively, you may express emotions through tears or your behaviour. The emotion may be related simply to difficulties with current study. However, there is very often a link to earlier learning which was distressing in some way.

On the other hand, positive emotions can have a beneficial effect upon learning. Positive feelings about oneself, the learning context, the course, and potential outcomes can produce much higher motivation.

## 6. Beliefs and values (why?)

Our belief systems exercise a strong hold over our learning. We use beliefs as a basis for action. Beliefs about self-worth and individual potential are especially powerful: some students have a deeply held belief that they 'not supposed to be' at university. Have you ever felt that you 'are not good enough', or 'people like me cannot do well at university'? Do you feel the subject you are studying is really worthwhile? If your primary difficulty lies on the belief level, this may be apparent in speech such as:

- 'I'm not likely to star at this subject';
- 'This is a soft option: I need to focus my attention on the other modules';
- 'It's only a discussion group so I don't need to turn up.'

There may also be a conflict between values and behaviours: 'Music is what is important to me, that's what I'd like to study, but I need a job at the end of this so, here I am, taking Business Studies.'

You can work through some of the activities earlier in this chapter and Chapter 1. Challenge negative thinking. Speak to someone who can give you useful and constructive advice about how to achieve your aims. Consider where the negative beliefs originated. Bear in mind that it can take time to change something as fundamental as our beliefs.

### 7. Identity (who?)

Some students, when they encounter difficulties, experience this at the identity level. They decide that they are 'the kind of person who can't learn'. They emphasise the 'I' in descriptions of their difficulties: 'I can't learn it . . .' or even 'People *like me* can't . . .'. Do you identify with being:

- a 'bad student';
- a 'lost cause';
- 'mediocre' or 'average';
- 'the clown in the group';
- 'the one who sits at the back';
- 'not a scientist';
- a similar negative identity?

If so, where did this identity come from?

Our sense of identity is very powerful, so if the primary difficulty is at the identity level, it is a good idea to address this as a priority.

### 8. Higher purpose or mission

'Higher purpose' refers to overall direction and motivation that drives a person. This might be the good that you hope will stem from completing your degree: to help others, be a role model, gain more independence, enter a profession that matters to you, etc. Usually, higher purpose is associated with wanting good for others, with creativity and artistic endeavour or with spirituality. If study is associated with a higher purpose, you are more likely to be well-motivated and to persevere through difficulties.



#### **Reflection** Identify your primary level for improvement

- Which of the previous levels do you think is most significant in its effects upon your learning and performance?
- Which levels have positive effects upon your studies or performance?
- To which levels do you most need to pay attention? What action will you take to address this?

## Closing comments

This chapter covers a great deal of ground. As with any issues that relate to intra-personal matters, it is not a chapter to race through and feel you have 'got it'.

Many of the exercises in this chapter can be repeated with specific issues or questions in mind. You will also find that the responses you give on a day when you wake up feeling confident and happy are very different from those you give on days when you feel more vulnerable. This is to be expected. The issues covered in this chapter provide useful material for further exploration through your reflective journal.

This chapter offered a basic introduction to some of the issues associated with personal self-management. The activities and strategies here may be all you will need for the issues that face you as a student and in your first graduate jobs. The chapter offers tools for analysing a situation quickly, for identifying resources, for managing your time, and for exploring your own mind-set. It offers strategies for developing a solution-focused, positive thinking style that can be applied in any circumstance, and not simply for study. It also offers you tools for beginning to analyse and understand emotional intelligence.

As a student, you are especially likely to experience times of uncertainty. A stimulating, higher-level education should be challenging. You should feel stretched. You should feel that occasionally the ground is moving beneath your feet. Confusion and uncertainty are characteristics of moving from 'novice' to more expert or sophisticated levels of thinking. If you know this, then you should be able to cope with that uncertainty without feeling something is very wrong.

Your intra-personal life is a rich source of information for you. It is one of the most important and valuable subjects you can ever study: you cannot know enough about the 'inner life' of your mind. The knowledge you gain about yourself and how you can best manage your own attitudes and thought processes will enable you to optimise your performance in any walk of life.

## Further reading

- Cottrell, Stella (2003) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Covey, S. R. (1999) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (London: Simon and Schuster).
- Fennell, M. (1999) *Overcoming Low Self-esteem: A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques* (London: Robinson).
- Goleman, D. (1995) *Emotional Intelligence* (London: Bloomsbury).
- Heron, J. (1992) *Feeling and Personhood* (London: Sage Publications).
- Neenan, M. and Dryden, W. (2002) *Life Coaching: A Cognitive-Behavioural Approach* (New York: Brunner-Routledge).